



The George H. W. Bush-Clinton-Castro Years: From the Cold War to the Colder War (1989-2001)

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U.S.-Cuban Relations: From the Cold War to the Colder War

Jorge I. Domínguez

Hundreds of thousands of Cuban troops deployed to nearly every corner of the globe—that seemed to be the nightmare of every US administration from the mid-1970s to the end of the 1980s. From its own perspective, President Fidel Castro's government attempted to use its activist foreign policy first to protect itself from hostile US policies, and second to leverage support from the Soviet Union and other communist countries for Cuba's own domestic development.

The first proposition had been articulated by Ernesto "Che" Guevara in the 1960s when he called on revolutionaries to create "two, three Vietnams" in order to confront and weaken the United States and its allies. Even as the Cuban government gradually edged away from ample support for many revolutionary insurgencies, the strategy of global engagement as the best defense against US offense persisted. The second proposition developed in the 1970s. Although Cuba's decisions to deploy troops or to undertake other internationalist missions were characteristically its own, it also furthered a long-term tendency to coordinate such policies with those of the Soviet Union, demonstrating thereby that Cuba was the Soviet Union's most reliable foreign policy ally in the Cold War, and providing a basis for a substantial claim on Soviet resources (Domínguez, 1989).

Indeed, Cuba was the only communist country able to deploy its armed forces thousands of miles from its borders to participate in wars that were, at best, only remotely related to the defense of the homeland. Those troops fighting on the savannahs of Angola or the steppes of Ethiopia were not Czechs, Poles, Mongols, or Bulgarians; they were Cubans. And unlike the US armed forces in Vietnam and the Soviet armed forces in Afghanistan, Cubans won the three wars they fought on African soil: Angola 1975-76, Ethiopia 1977-78, and Angola 1987-88. Cuba's military effort was impressive even when compared to the US military effort during the Vietnam war. From 1975 through 1989, Cuba kept more troops deployed to African countries each year than the United States had stationed in Vietnam during the peak year of the war (1968), relative to the respective populations of Cuba and the United States.

The Soviet Union, in turn, provided massive economic, military, and political support for Cuba, especially from the mid-1970s to the mid-1980s. Such assistance enabled the Cuban economy to recover from its collapse at the end of the 1960s and funded the growth of a social welfare state that substantially increased Cuba's quality of life, notably its standards of education and health.

In 1991, the Soviet Union ceased to exist, and no Soviet successor state provided assistance to President Fidel Castro's government. Cuba's economy shrank dramatically in the early years of the 1990s; it stabilized at a low level only in 1996. And Che's old slogan sounds ironic in the 1990s, because Vietnam itself has rushed headlong toward a market economy.

Given Cuba's diminishing power, how can we make sense of the overall pattern of US-Cuban relations in the 1990s following the end of the Cold War in Europe? Why was it that the US

government established workable relations with every remaining communist government but Cuba? Even some of the most problematic of those governments have received greater deference from the US than has Cuba's. The United States engaged Serbia's government respectfully, for example, in order to reach the 1996 Dayton, Ohio, accords that ended the civil war in Bosnia. And the United States has been prepared to provide various forms of assistance to North Korea in exchange for that country's commitment to forgo the development of nuclear weapons.

This article explores four scholarly explanations for the US position. First, the distribution of power in the international system, as it changed with the end of the Cold War in Europe, is a major explanation for both the dramatic redesign and curtailment of Cuban foreign policy and the repositioning of US policy toward Cuba. It fails to explain, however, the intense US preoccupation with prescribing the details of Cuba's future domestic politics.

Therefore, a second explanation comes from exploring ideological themes of long standing in both US and Cuban policies. There is a close correspondence between current and historical ideological themes in US policy toward Cuba, and these were exacerbated both by the shift in the international distribution of power and by the decay of the revolutionary belief system in Cuba. US policy toward its near-neighbors has long sought to prescribe the nature of domestic politics and economics. This second argument, however, still fails to explain sufficiently how these large structural and ideological causes yielded specific militant and ideological US policies in the 1990s.

Consequently, a third explanation considers the role of domestic politics in both countries, arguing that hardliners in each, perhaps unwittingly, helped each other in sustaining or fostering confrontational policies. In particular, members of the U.S. Congress and certain Cuban American organizations succeeded in reshaping US policy toward Cuba in the 1990s by making effective strategic use of "mobilizing incidents"; namely, public events that served as opportunities to encourage the hardline Congressional minority to push through new legislation.

The ultimate question, given the preceding three arguments, is why the United States did not invade Cuba in the 1990s. This essay aims to suggest that the United States was deterred from such actions both by Cuba's military capabilities and by the "balancing" provided by other international actors. Western European and Latin American governments and Canada deterred the United States from adopting even more aggressive policies. Accidental war was also prevented because both the United States and Cuba developed low-key confidence-building measures. This combination of explanations accounted for both high confrontation and impasse in US-Cuban relations through the 1990s.

Was Thucydides Right?

In his study of the Peloponnesian War, Thucydides formulated the classic proposition of the realist school of international affairs: "The strong do what they can and the weak suffer what they must" (Thucydides, 1951: 331). For many years, Cuban foreign policy rebuked this master analyst of ancient Greek international relations, for small, relatively weak Cuba behaved as if it

were a major power. With the end of the Cold War in Europe, Cuba's exceptionalism ended as well.

Thucydides' hypothesis embodies a strong prediction about Cuba's international behavior once it was deprived of Soviet support and was left with just the resources of a small country. The evidence for the hypothesis is compelling. In September 1989, Cuba completed the repatriation of its troops from Ethiopia (Pérez Ruiz, 1990). In March 1990, all Cuban military personnel in Nicaragua were brought back to Cuba (Granma Weekly Review, 1991: 13). In May 1991, Cuba's last troops were repatriated from Angola (Bohemia, 1991: 33). Also in 1990 and 1991, Cuba brought home its troops and military advisers from various other countries; the longest-lived of these smaller military missions had been deployed to the Congo (Brazzaville), where it lasted for fourteen years. Thus, as the Cold War ended in Europe and Cuba lost the military and economic backing of the Soviet Union, Cuba's overseas military presence came to a near-instantaneous end.

Cuban support for revolutionary movements had been another pillar of its far-reaching internationalist behavior. In some cases, those whom Cuba had supported finally won: guerrillas of SWAPO (South West African People's Organization) laid down their arms to become the government of newly independent Namibia, and the African National Congress won South Africa's national elections and remade the political system.

More telling is the evolution of Cuba's relations with El Salvador's guerrillas, the Frente Farabundo Martí de Liberación Nacional (FMLN). In June 1991, Cuba's Foreign Ministry explained that "Cuba does not renounce, nor will it ever renounce, nor has it any reason to hide or camouflage its strong bonds of brotherhood and solidarity" with the FMLN, even though the latter had yet to lay down its weapons. Nevertheless, the Foreign Ministry added, "in order to foster the climate of trust required for negotiations and as a clear signal of its political will to contribute to that process, Cuba has been limiting since [April 1991] its solidarity with the FMLN to the political level" (Granma, 1991: 8). Noteworthy though it was to confirm, in effect, that Cuba had been providing military assistance to the insurgency well into 1991, the decision to stop such military engagement at this time is nonetheless consistent with a realist hypothesis. Cuba could no longer afford such a risky foreign policy.

Once a peace agreement had been signed in El Salvador, President Castro chose a symbolic event to announce that Cuba would henceforth not support revolutionary movements militarily. He did so in January 1992 while hosting several former high officials of the Kennedy administration (along with Cuban and former Soviet officials) to reflect on the 1962 missile crisis.¹

In any one of these instances, the history is, of course, more complex than what has been reported here, but the pattern is unambiguously clear. When civil war broke out again in Angola in the early 1990s, for example, Cuban troops did not return. The Angolan government hired South African mercenaries and mobilized support from other governments to prevail on the battlefield.

Cuba's adjustment to the changed international system, of course, went beyond strictly military issues. In May 1990, President Castro inaugurated two new hotels on Varadero Beach, including one built by "foreign capitalists." He announced that Cuba would henceforth seek foreign investment to develop its economy. The Communist Party's Political Bureau endorsed this policy shift soon thereafter (*Granma Weekly Review*, 1990a: 3; 1990b, 1). For a communist system founded on the expropriation of foreign property, this was a major turnabout.

On October 30, 1994, before the 12th Havana International Fair, Vice President Carlos Lage, Cuba's de facto prime minister, articulated the new policy of luring foreign direct investment.

We are offering you an orderly country, a coherent and irreversible policy of openness to capital investment, a sufficient and extended economic infrastructure, a productive sector aimed at achieving efficiency, a hard-working, devoted, highly educated and trained people, a society without terrorism or drugs. (Lage, 1995: 89)

Except for the last phrase, any Latin American finance minister might have made the same speech.² On September 5, 1995, furthermore, the Cuban National Assembly adopted a new foreign investment law. Its preamble alluded to the triggering reason: "In today's world, without the existence of the socialist bloc, with a globalizing world economy and strong hegemonistic tendencies in the economic, political, and military fields" (Republic of Cuba, 1995: 1), Cuba had little choice but to suffer what it must.

Cuban foreign trade was also drastically affected. Cuban exports dropped from approximately 5.4 billion pesos in 1989 to 1.1 billion pesos in 1993, while imports plunged from 8.1 billion pesos in 1989 to 2.0 billion pesos in 1993.³ Foreign trade recovered somewhat thereafter, with 1996 exports and imports standing at \$2.0 and \$3.7 billion, respectively. Trade also underwent a reorientation. In 1989, European countries (especially communist countries) accounted for 88 percent of Cuban trade turnover; in 1994, that proportion was down to 45 percent. The trade share of Asian countries increased, but the value of that trade actually dropped between 1989 and 1994. Only in the Americas did both trade share and value increase from 6 percent and 766 million pesos in 1989 to 35 percent and 1.1 billion pesos in 1994. All of this Cuban trade, moreover, came to be conducted on market prices (Banco Nacional de Cuba, 1995: 11-13; Cuba: Economic Report, 1996; US Central Intelligence Agency, 1995).

Thus, from 1989 to 1991, the international system was transformed, and Cuban foreign policy changed accordingly. Cuba repatriated its troops, stopped its military assistance to insurgencies, and began to conform to a world market economy. Desovietized forever, Cuba became again just an island archipelago under the hot Caribbean sun.

As for the United States, Thucydides' hypothesis also forecasts that the stronger powers will flex their muscles to achieve fundamental objectives. The United States certainly did so with regard to Cuba. The US government, for example, made it clear to various African and Latin American governments seeking its assistance that they could not remain Cuba's military allies.

The Bush administration also communicated to Soviet president Mikhail Gorbachev that the quality of US-Soviet relations, in what turned out to be the closing days of the Soviet Union, required that the USSR terminate its military alliance with Cuba. In August 1991, various Soviet civilian and military leaders staged an unsuccessful coup to overthrow Gorbachev. The US government backed Gorbachev openly; the Cuban government remained silent as the coup unfolded. Days later, during US secretary of state James Baker's celebratory visit to Moscow, the Soviet government announced its unilateral decision to withdraw all Soviet troops from Cuba. (Soviet troops had been in Cuba since the 1962 missile crisis.) Cuba was not consulted; in fact, its government was not even informed before the public announcement. The Soviet Union also terminated subsidized arms sales to the Cuban military (Cuba Interests Section in the United States, 1991; Smith, 1993: 136-137; Blank, 1994: 104-110). And in February 1992, at a meeting of the United Nations Human Rights Commission, the new Russian government voted for a motion to condemn the Cuban government's violation of human rights (Pérez, 1993). A three decades-old political, economic, and military alliance had been shattered.

In the same spirit of coercive diplomacy, the Cuban Liberty and Democratic Solidarity (Libertad) Act of 1996 (better known as the Helms-Burton Act) mandated that the United States would reduce its assistance to any successor state of the Soviet Union by the exact amount that such a country provided to assist Cuba in maintaining its military and intelligence facilities. Although a loophole-riddled waiver provision cancelled, in practice, the effect of this section, the general perspective it articulated reflected actual US policy (US House of Representatives, 1996: sec. 106).

On the other hand, Thucydides' hypothesis is open to the interpretation that a major power has a range of choices about how and where to wield its clout. This is even more evident in the contemporary formulation of the neorealist school of international relations. For such scholars, states seek power, and calculate their interests in terms of power, relative to the nature of the international system they face (Keohane, 1983: 507). One consequence of such reasoning is to discount fully what might occur at the "unit level"; that is, largely to disregard the domestic regime, arrangements, and circumstances of states in the international system.

US policy toward Cuba in the 1990s most decidedly did not conform to this expectation. The centerpiece of that policy became the endeavor to oust the Castro government. The collapse of what was once Cuban foreign policy during the Cold War was, from Washington's perspective, an insufficient achievement. Instead of celebrating that Cuba was no longer able to project its power overseas, the US government was angry that Cuba's political regime did not crumble. The US hostility toward the Cuban government heightened as the Cold War came to an end and precisely when Cuba ceased to pose a security threat to most US interests. Neither realism nor neorealism can explain this temper tantrum in US policy toward Cuba, or why US-Cuban relations went from the Cold War to a colder war.

Ideological Explanations

The Monroe Doctrine is often presented as a statement in the tradition of Realpolitik, whereby the United States sought to deter European reconquest in the Americas beyond the colonies the

European powers still held. That reading is, literally, a half-truth. The operative sentence of President James Monroe's Message to Congress (December 2, 1823) features an ideological policy:

We owe it, therefore, to candor and to the amicable relations existing between the United States and those powers to declare that we should consider any attempt on their part to extend their system to any portion of this hemisphere as dangerous to our peace and safety. (Perkins, 1963: 56-57)

It was not just their power but also their system, which was "essentially different," that Monroe sought to keep away from the Americas. Monroe's ideological intent was instantly understood by Austrian chancellor Klemens von Metternich. The United States, he wrote to his Russian counterpart, had "distinctly and clearly announced their intention to set not only power against power, but, to express it more exactly, altar against altar." If the United States were to prevail, Metternich continued, "what would become of our religious and political institutions, of the moral force of our governments...?" (Perkins, 1963: 392). Ideological goals have been integral to US policy toward Latin America ever since.

President Theodore Roosevelt amended the Monroe Doctrine in his Message to Congress of 1905. "There are, of course, limits to the wrongs which any self-respecting nation can endure," he wrote. Such wrongs include "some State unable to keep order among its own people...and unwilling to do justice to those outsiders who treat it well." Those circumstances "may result in our having to take action to protect our rights," though "such action will not be taken with a view to territorial aggression" (Perkins, 1963: 223). The US government thus claimed the right to intervene in the affairs of its near-neighbors to stop internal disorder, as it defined it, or to redress perceived injustices done to foreigners. From the outset of the formulation of what came to be known as the Roosevelt Corollary, economic "injustices" committed against foreigners—that is, nonpayment of debts—would warrant US intervention. Under these and related policies, the United States occupied Cuba militarily from 1906 to 1909.

From the 1930s to the 1980s, the U.S. propensity to intervene in Latin American countries for these reasons was tempered by the structure of the international system and, in particular, by competition with Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union. Cold War interventions, for example, characteristically featured a strong "anti-Soviet" component; the United States rarely intervened in the internal affairs of its near-neighbors unless it perceived a superpower threat.⁴ With the collapse of the Soviet Union and the transformation of the international system, the United States was liberated to pursue once again ideological interests in the Monrovia tradition. US interventions in Panama in December 1989 and Haiti in September 1994 exemplify the renewed willingness of the United States to deploy force to reshape the domestic politics of its near-neighbors in the absence of a threat from another superpower. The collapse of the USSR was, of course, especially pertinent to US-Cuban relations: the Soviet Union no longer sought to stop the United States from attempting to remake Cuban domestic politics. Free at last to rediscover its history, the US Congress enacted the Cuban Liberty and Democratic Solidarity Act of 1996.

The Helms-Burton Act captured well this ideological tradition in US foreign policy. Section 201, "Assistance to a Free and Independent Cuba," affirmed that "the self-determination of the Cuban

people is a sovereign and national right of the citizens of Cuba which must be exercised free of interference by the government of any other country.” Subsequent sections, however, indicate that the United States still claimed the right to determine in intrusive detail which “system” of governance would be permissible in the Americas (US House of Representatives, 1996: sec. 201).

Section 205 stipulates the definition for determining when Cuba would have a transitional government. It requires that Cuba free all political prisoners, legalize all political activity, and make a public commitment to organize free and fair elections. But the definition of the transitional government also includes ceasing interference with Radio Martí or Television Martí, permitting the reinstatement of citizenship to Cuban-born persons returning to Cuba, and “taking appropriate steps” to return expropriated property to US citizens or compensate them accordingly. It also requires the exclusion of Fidel and Raúl Castro from Cuba’s government, a provision closed to the hypothesis that Cuba’s people might choose them as their governors in a free and competitive election.

Even if a transitional government were to carry out all these procedures, Section 202 still seeks to limit US assistance to such a government principally to humanitarian aid (food, medicine, emergency energy needs) and to “preparing the Cuban military forces to adjust to an appropriate role in a democracy” (US House of Representatives, 1996: sec. 202).

The definition of a democratic government, under Section 206, stipulates some widely accepted criteria, such as free and fair elections, respect for civil liberties, an independent judiciary, and so forth. But part of the definition also stipulates that Cuba must be “substantially moving toward a market-oriented economic system” and show “demonstrable progress in returning to United States citizens” once expropriated property or “providing full compensation for such property” (US House of Representatives, 1996: sec. 206).

Even if one were to agree that TV Martí should be seen and heard in Cuba, those who lost their citizenship should regain it, market economics works best, Fidel and Raúl Castro’s services should not be needed in a future Cuban government, and property should be returned or compensated, all of these desiderata go well beyond any internationally recognized criteria for the determination of democratic or transitional democratizing governments under the charters of the United Nations or the Organization of American States. Mandating them in US legislation as defining characteristics of a democratic or transitional Cuban government made a mockery of the pledge to respect Cuban sovereignty.

The Helms-Burton Act was, however, quite faithful to the themes of the Monroe Doctrine and the Roosevelt Corollary. It claimed for the United States the unilateral right to decide a wide array of domestic policies and arrangements in a nominally sovereign post-Castro Cuba. In the Monroe Doctrine, the United States asserted its right to specify which system of government was acceptable in the Americas. In the Roosevelt Corollary, the US government claimed the additional right to stipulate specific economic and other policies and specifically to redress the nonpayment of debts. The Helms-Burton Act rediscovers the ideological brio of imperialism. At the end of the twentieth century, as in centuries past, the United States demanded the right to set the framework for the political and economic system it would tolerate inside Cuba.

In the 1990s, there were several important ideological changes in Cuba as well. A central feature of Cuban politics became the erosion of belief in Marxism-Leninism and in the revolutionary ethos that marked the Cuban experience in the 1960s. In their place, the Cuban leadership proposed nothing. Its one remaining ideological commitment is, to be sure, a fierce adherence to the claim that it, and only it, is capable of defending the Cuban nation from foreign aggression. Two important texts illustrate this shift: one precedes and one follows the marked deterioration of US-Cuban relations that occurred in early 1996.

On July 26, 1995, Fidel Castro marked one more anniversary of the attack he led against the Moncada barracks of the Cuban army in 1953. As always, he sought to legitimate his claim to rule with reference to his historical “merits,” even though the “glorious past” of the anti-Batista struggle was rapidly receding. He also touted the evidence that the economic decline had stopped and that some improvement in the standard of living was under way. He expressed, however, no vision for the future. He simply reiterated that somehow Cuba was still Marxist-Leninist, even if economic policy had changed direction “substantially and rather radically.”

In addition, he warned, the “elements of capitalism introduced in our country bring along the noxious and alienating features of that system, such as corruption and bribery.” He did not explain, however, how anyone but he could distinguish between the good and the bad capitalists. Castro also attacked those US policies that sought to promote academic and cultural exchanges, expressing fear that they would subvert the Cuban political system. But he did not distinguish this US opening he did not like from his other demands that the United States should adopt more open policies toward Cuba (Radio Rebelde, 1995).

On March 23, 1996, the Communist Party’s Political Bureau met to discuss the country’s situation and approved a statement eventually read publicly by General Raúl Castro. The statement is riddled with contradictions on nearly every subject it discusses. For example, it defended the economic policies launched in the early 1990s: self employment, freer agricultural markets, wider scope for peasant production and marketing, rural cooperatives, foreign direct investment—these were all engines of economic recovery for a country that suffered so drastically in the first half of the decade. In each case, however, the Political Bureau statement also recorded the objections of the ideological hardliners, who nevertheless provided no alternative solutions for filling the basic needs of the population.

Only on one subject is the statement consistent: its harsh, generally unfair, and dogmatic criticism of scholars and scholarship in think tanks, which the party itself had formally sponsored and from which Cuban government and party officials had systematically and regularly drawn information and analysis (Granma, 1996).

In the mid-1990s, therefore, Cuban leaders lost their ideological compass.⁵ They had authorized economic measures of which they mostly disapproved but had no choice but to adopt. They could no longer claim to represent revolutionary ideals. They demonstrated a greater intolerance for the intellectual work of scholars closely affiliated with government and party institutions—work that was critical in some respects but also remarkably loyal politically. Indeed, the Cuban political regime increasingly came to resemble a dictatorship committed to protecting

international capitalists in exchange for economic growth—a far cry from what was once called a socialist revolution.

One consequence of this loss of belief—the decay of the regime’s ideological foundations—was to make the population more vulnerable to the spread of alternative belief systems. The same Cuban government that was compelled to open to the international economy sought to shut out the contamination from international society, just as the United States was reenergizing the ideological strains in its foreign policy and rediscovering the virtues of end-of-the-century imperialism. And all this happened while Cuba’s network of international alliances was crumbling.

An ideological explanation rooted in the rediscovery of historical themes in US policy toward its near-neighbors helps to explain the shift from the Cold War to the colder war. As the weaker country adjusted, the stronger one expanded its intrusive ambitions beyond shaping international behavior toward determining the structure of domestic politics.

The Domestic Politics of US-Cuban Relations

Structural and ideological arguments set the contours of US-Cuban relations, but actions in each country provide the necessary connections between macro-causes and micro-outcomes. How did political processes generate the specific events and policies of the 1990s?

Early in the decade, the Bush administration appeared to believe that the Cuban political regime would fall from its own weight. That seemed to be the lesson of communism in Europe. Without Soviet subsidies, many observers reasoned, Cuba was ripe for change. There was no need to spend significantly greater US resources to overthrow the Castro government.

In 1989, US Senator Connie Mack (Republican, Florida) introduced legislation to prohibit trade between Cuba and the subsidiaries of US firms operating in third countries. Senator Mack was, in part, responding to an important segment of his Cuban American constituents, who were well organized through the Cuban American National Foundation. In 1989, 1990, and 1991, the US Department of State went on record opposing Mack’s proposals because they extended US legal jurisdiction beyond the boundaries of the United States. The proposals did not get far in Congress.

In early 1992, however, US Representative Robert Torricelli (Democrat, New Jersey) formulated a bill, which he called the Cuban Democracy Act, featuring the same provisions. Torricelli was convinced that the Bush administration was too passive in its approach to Cuba and that a combination of stiffer sanctions, but also some calibrated subtle openings, would throw the Castro government off balance. Torricelli’s bill, for example, would eventually facilitate telephone communication between Cuba and the United States.

Torricelli also saw a partisan opportunity in an election year. In April 1992, Robert Gelbard, principal deputy assistant secretary of state for inter-American affairs, testified for the Bush administration against Torricelli’s bill, just as the administration had opposed earlier versions of

it. The rising Democratic contender for the presidency, Bill Clinton, endorsed Torricelli's bill, however. By May 1992, the Bush administration dropped its opposition. In September 1992, in the heat of the campaign, Congress passed the Cuban Democracy Act by large majorities, and President Bush signed it into law (Kaplowitz and Kaplowitz, 1993: 234-236). The enactment of the Cuban Democracy Act, therefore, is best explained as an outcome of US domestic politics.

The clout of hardliners is an insufficient explanation for the bill's enactment, however. Hardliners succeeded because they maneuvered strategically during what might be called a "mobilizing incident"; that is, an event that lifts some political constraints blocking action, affects some swing votes, and, in this case, made effective use of ideological legacies from the Monroe-Roosevelt tradition. The "mobilizing incident" here was the presidential election and the partisan bidding for Cuban American votes in Florida, a pivotal state. That was the key to this political outcome.

The story of the Helms-Burton Act was similar. The Republican electoral victory in the Congressional elections of 1994 installed Senator Jesse Helms (Republican, North Carolina) as chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee and Representative Dan Burton (Republican, Indiana) as chairman of the House Subcommittee on Western Hemisphere Affairs. Torricelli had chaired the subcommittee in the previous Congress; the three Cuban American members of Congress served on it. The one real change was Helms's new role.

Cuban American lobbies mobilized to tighten economic sanctions on Cuba. The goal was to stop foreign investment in Cuba and, if possible, to impair Cuban trade. The means was to empower legally those whose property had been expropriated by the Cuban government to bring litigation in US courts against firms that "trafficked" in such property. Certainly a foreign investor who had come to operate a once-expropriated firm was a prime target, but in theory, even trading with a Cuban state enterprise created from such expropriation would make an international firm vulnerable to litigation. The bill's framers hoped that, faced with potentially high legal costs in US courts, international firms would stay away from Cuba.

The Clinton administration opposed the Helms-Burton bill when it was first submitted. Though the bill had important support in the House of Representatives, enough Republicans and most Democrats agreed with the administration that this bill's extraterritorial provisions would cause serious harm to the U.S. relations with its main trading partners. In October 1995, Senator Helms was outmaneuvered and had to agree to delete the property litigation procedures (Title III). The Senate approved only a much weaker bill that would have had, at most, modest effects on US policy toward Cuba (Congressional Record, 1995: S15584-S15589; CubaINFO, 1995a: 1-2). In late 1995 and early 1996, the federal budget battle between the President and Congress took center stage, and the Helms-Burton bill languished and seemed mortally weakened.

Once again, the clout of hardliners was insufficient to get the bill enacted; instead, it would be the skill of hardliners in capitalizing strategically on yet another "mobilizing incident" that would prove to be the key to this second political outcome. Thanks to the mobilizing incident, Helms-Burton moved from the Congressional back burner to approval by overwhelming majorities in both chambers. The domestic policy debate took it for granted that the policies of

Monroe and Theodore Roosevelt did, indeed, provide the proper ideological context for US policy toward Cuba.

During the spring and summer of 1994, Cubans in increasing numbers emigrated across the Straits of Florida in unseaworthy boats, rafts, and other improvised craft in a desperate attempt to reach the United States. A group of Cuban Americans called Brothers to the Rescue, founded in 1991, had been flying over the straits to spot the migrants and report them to the US Coast Guard, which would rescue them and bring them safely to US shores.

In subsequent months, however, Brothers to the Rescue shifted from a humanitarian to a political mission, entering Cuban airspace to drop flyers criticizing the Cuban government. This had not happened since the 1960s; it alarmed the government's supporters and especially the military services. On January 9 and 13, 1996, Brothers to the Rescue dropped thousands of such flyers over the city of Havana. At that point, a crisis broke out within the Cuban government; hardliners demanded authorization to shoot down such aerial intrusions. As Cuba's official account notes, "the Cuban government gave instructions to the Air Force that what happened on January 9 and 13 could by no means be tolerated" (Robaina González, 1996). On February 24, 1996, three planes piloted by Brothers to the Rescue approached Cuban international waters; at least one penetrated Cuban air space. The Cuban Air Force chased the unarmed civilian airplanes and shot down two of them over international waters.

The United Nations Security Council noted—alas, on July 26—that the "unlawful shooting down by the Cuban Air Force of two civil aircraft on 24 February 1996 violated the principle that States must refrain from the use of weapons against civil aircraft in flight," and condemned such Cuban behavior (UN, Security Council, 1996).

The aircraft shootdown coincided with increased political repression in Cuba. On October 10, 1995 (the anniversary of the beginning of Cuba's first war of independence), 140 small, unofficial Cuban opposition groups coalesced around a plan to found the Concilio Cubano (Cuban Council). The Concilio's aims were to persuade the Cuban government to grant a general amnesty for all political prisoners, show full respect for the present Constitution and fundamental laws, fulfill its obligations to respect human rights under the United Nations Charter, grant freedom of economic organization, and hold free and direct elections, on the basis of the pluralistic nature of society. The Concilio's subsequent behavior confirmed its commitment to use only peaceful means to achieve its goals. On February 15, 1997, however, the Cuban government banned all gatherings by Concilio and arrested its leading members (Hidalgo and Machado, 1995, 1996a, b, c; Amnesty International, 1996).

The Cuban Air Force's actions and the hardline domestic crackdown forced President Clinton to make a decision. For the first time since the 1962 missile crisis, a president of the United States contemplated ordering the US armed forces to take military action against Cuba.⁶ He could have chosen among several military options of varying degrees of severity; instead, he rejected all of them and agreed to accept the Helms-Burton Act. Congress swiftly resurrected the bill and decisively approved it. The President signed it into law on the date of the 1996 Florida presidential election primary.

One salient feature of the Helms-Burton Act was the property litigation provisions in Title III. The act authorized the President to waive this legislation, however; a determination had to be made every six months. As the crisis over Cuba subsided and his prospects for reelection improved—no new mobilizing incidents—and as the costs to US relations with its allies of implementing Title III became clearer, Clinton waived Title III first on July 16, 1996, despite warnings of electoral retribution from Cuban American voters, and again in early January 1997. On this date, he stated that he would waive it indefinitely. Other aspects of the act, such as penalties to be imposed on Russia if it were to continue or intensify its relations with Cuba, are also waivable.⁷ As a practical matter, most—though not all—of the provisions that affect third countries are inoperative. It is “dead” law.

Nevertheless, these events and the law created two policy legacies. First, the United States had very few instruments or policy alternatives left with which to punish the Cuban government should another worrisome episode occur, be it another shutdown, an emigration crisis, an incident around the US naval base at Guantánamo Bay, or even more intense domestic repression. The Helms-Burton Act also codified all US sanctions on Cuba, thereby removing presidential discretion in the management of US policy toward Cuba. The odds increased that the President of the United States would order an armed attack against Cuba the next time there is a serious incident.

Second, hardliners in the United States and Cuba became each other’s best allies. Hard-charging Cuban American lobbies pressed effectively and successfully for Helms-Burton. Hardliners in Cuba persuaded Fidel Castro to give the air force standing orders to shoot, and to crack down on Concilio Cubano. Cuba’s shutdown and crackdown strengthened the hand of hardliners in the United States, reviving and enacting Helms-Burton. And Helms-Burton, in turn, inflamed the Cuban government and deepened its propensity for political repression and intolerance of even slightly different ideas, as evident in the Political Bureau statement of March 23, 1996.

In short, domestic politics in both countries activated the potential evident in the structural and ideological explanations and helped bring the United States and Cuba closer to intensified conflict, to the detriment of the goals each government claimed to seek—for Cuba, a more effective insertion in the international system; and for the United States, a “peaceful democratic transition in Cuba.”

Preventing War

The burden of the preceding analysis suggests that the United States and Cuba in the 1990s were on the edge of a major confrontation. Indeed, this analysis makes it difficult to understand why a major military clash did not occur. The structural, ideological, and domestic political explanations all point toward armed conflict. Since the end of the Cold War in Europe, moreover, the United States twice demonstrated its willingness to intervene militarily in the domestic affairs of its near-neighbors. It did so first in Panama in 1989 and then in Haiti in 1994.

President Clinton’s formulation of a key foreign policy principle regarding his decision to intervene in Haiti suggested a highly expansive view of the US “right” to intervene. For

example, a few months before the US intervention in Haiti, President Clinton visited Moscow and was asked his views concerning Russian military intervention in some newly independent successor states of the Soviet Union. He replied,

I think there will be times when you will be involved, and you will be more likely to be involved in some of these areas near you, just like the United States has been involved in the last several years in Panama and Grenada near our area.
(White House, 1994)

Why, then, did the United States not invade Cuba in the 1990s? The principal explanation is probably its assessment that the costs of such intervention were too high. Cuba's successful deterrence of the United States remained the strongest explanation for the absence of war and for the commitment of the US government to foster a "democratic transition" in Cuba that would remain "peaceful," to quote the official slogans. This deterrence had two important aspects.

The first was strictly military. The Cuban armed forces had become a sad, pale shadow of the powerful institution that strutted the world stage in the 1970s and 1980s (Walker, 1996). But they retained sufficient strength and fighting élan to make a US invasion of Cuba much costlier than the US interventions in Panama and Haiti. The size and cost of the US deployment to ensure victory in Cuba, and the casualties that US forces would likely suffer, helped to deter a US invasion. Cuba thus had a "bee sting" capability.

The second dimension of deterrence was political. Consider President Clinton's statement in Moscow. He did not endorse an all-purpose justification for either Russian or US military intervention in the affairs of near-neighbors. Instead, he argued, getting involved was justified

when there is an involvement beyond the borders of the nation, that it is consistent with international law and, whenever possible, actually supported through other nations either through the United Nations or through some other instrument of international law. (White House, 1994)

The US intervention in Haiti in 1994 was endorsed by the United Nations Security Council, for example. And, although President Clinton's statement clearly did not preclude the possibility of the United States intervening militarily in the absence of a UN endorsement, the policies of other governments and international institutions weighed heavily on Clinton's own calculus of costs and benefits. Because US policy toward Cuba (especially the Helms-Burton Act) was opposed by most US allies, the likelihood of US military intervention in Cuba was lessened.

Therefore, the "balancing" of US power by the power of others was also an important explanation for the absence of war between the United States and Cuba in the 1990s—an explanation consistent with what are sometimes called neorealist perspectives on international relations. The premier neorealist scholar, Kenneth Waltz, wrote accordingly about the international system after the end of the Cold War. Waltz argued (as he had consistently about the international system before 1989) that "the response of other countries to one among them seeking or gaining preponderant power is to try to balance against it. Hegemony leads to balance, which is easy to see historically and to understand theoretically." In the post-Cold War world,

Waltz averred, “that is now happening [in the 1990s], but haltingly so because the United States still has benefits to offer and many other countries have become accustomed to their easy lives with the United States bearing many of their burdens” (Waltz, 1994: 169). This characterization fits well with how the European Union, Canada, and most Latin American and Caribbean countries sought to “balance” against US policy toward Cuba, especially in the aftermath of the Torricelli and Helms-Burton Acts.⁸

To prevent an accidental turn toward a military confrontation, in addition, the Cuban and U.S. governments engaged in a number of low-key confidence-building measures in the 1990s.⁹ Many of the specific measures had been discussed within the Bush administration but had been put on hold as the 1992 presidential election approached. Their implementation, for the most part, began in 1993.

The two coast guards began to collaborate more closely, sharing some information on search and rescue missions in the Straits of Florida. This collaboration would become especially important during the 1994 migration crisis and its aftermath; it also led to various instances of joint action against drug traffickers. At times, for example, the US Coast Guard provided the information, while its Cuban counterpart (*Guardafronteras*) arrested the criminals (and, in some cases, has returned them to the United States). On October 8, 1996, for instance, the US and Cuban Coast Guards collaborated on the seizure of 1.7 tons of cocaine (CubaINFO, 1996b: 1). On the US side, the Justice Department and the FBI reciprocated, warning against terrorist actions departing from Florida, and brought terrorists to court (CubaINFO, 1995b: 1).

Some confidence-building measures also began in 1993 in and around the US naval base at Guantánamo. For example, when US forces were scheduled to engage in a military exercise, the US base commander would give advance notification to his counterpart on the Cuban side, communicating some aspect of the exercise that the Cubans typically would have observed anyway. The information was operationally useless to the Cuban forces, but the procedure opened a communication channel that would expand and become useful in time. Cuba’s Revolutionary Armed Forces responded in kind, providing the US command at the Guantánamo base advance notification of their live-ammunition exercises. By the late 1990s, computer connections were set up between the U.S. and Cuban forces on both sides of this border to facilitate communication and prevent a military accident. Collaborative plans were also developed to facilitate civil and military aviation over the Guantanamo naval base air space (Klepak, 2000, pp. 21-22).

The most important reason for US-Cuban contact and collaboration was to cope with the effects of the migration flow. In December 1984, the two governments signed a migration agreement. Cuba agreed to take back a specified number of Cubans whom the United States had found excludable under its own laws (most had come through Mariel harbor by sea in 1980), and the United States agreed to accept lawful Cuban migrants on a routine basis. This agreement was suspended in May 1985 and reinstated in November 1987.¹⁰ The number of Cuban immigrants accepted by the United States each year thereafter, however, always remained below five thousand. During Cuba’s economic crisis of the early 1990s, the pressures to emigrate built up. The worst year of the economic crisis turned out to be 1993; the frequency of rafters increased that year and continued into early 1994.

On August 5, 1994, the largest riot since the early 1960s broke out in the city of Havana. On August 12, the Cuban government stopped preventing emigration by boat or raft; some 35,000 people fled Cuba over the next few weeks. On September 9, 1994, the two governments reached a new agreement to stop the flow. Another more comprehensive agreement was signed on May 2, 1995. Through these agreements, the Clinton administration reversed several decades of US migration policy toward Cuba. Henceforth, Cubans on the high seas would no longer be treated presumptively as refugees; when picked up by the US Coast Guard, they would be interrogated to discern their motives, but with the expectation that they would be sent back to Cuba. The new agreement also provided for the lawful, orderly migration of no fewer than 20,000 Cubans to the United States every year; an annual emigration lottery was created to give opportunities to those who had no relatives in the United States. In 1996, 500,000 people applied for such visas.¹¹

Thus in 1995 as in decades past, the governments of Cuba and the United States, each for its own reasons, adopted the migration policies most favored by the other government. The United States wanted to stop the illegal waves of Cubans washing up on Florida shores. Cuba wanted to stop the thefts and hijackings that had been part of those emigration attempts. The sharp reduction of the illegal flow of Cuban migrants across the Straits of Florida would also reduce the likelihood of military confrontation, albeit accidental, between US and Cuban forces patrolling the straits.

As part of the 1994 migration crisis, nearly thirty thousand Cubans were held temporarily in camps at the US Guantánamo naval base. U.S. and Cuban military authorities developed a constructive relationship in 1994-95 to deal with the complexities of this situation. Meetings were held every four to six weeks between the high-ranking Cuban and US military authorities at the base to deal with practical matters, making it less likely that one side would misunderstand the other's behavior. These meetings continued even after the migration crisis subsided; one of them (in December 1995) became public, at least partly because it was attended by General John Sheehan, chief of the US Atlantic Command.¹²

Equally noteworthy was the collaboration between the two governments after the February 24, 1996, shutdown, so as to prevent militant Cuban Americans from drawing the two governments into renewed confrontation or accidental combat. Brothers to the Rescue and other Cuban American organizations continued to stage events on the high seas at the site of the shutdown to honor those killed in the incident and others whose boats or rafts capsized as a consequence of Cuban air force or coast guard action. For each of these events, both governments set down clear markers for the Cuban American flotillas that headed toward the US-Cuban maritime border (Rohter, 1997: A12). At such times, the respective coast guards, supported by their air forces, established close communications; US Coast Guard officers would travel to Havana in advance of each flotilla episode to discuss what each side would do to prevent a violent incident.¹³

In May 1999, U.S. drug czar General Barry McCaffrey stated that Cuba was not an accomplice of drug trafficking. Drug trafficking through Cuba represented only 9 percent of all traffic in the Caribbean's Bahamas-Cuba-Jamaica area. McCaffrey noted that Cuba made substantial efforts to combat drug trafficking and that it could not do more principally because it lacked the equipment for effective interdiction. He acknowledged Cuban initiatives to cooperate with the United States to combat drug trafficking (New York Times, 1999, p. A3; U.S. Executive Office of the

Presidency, 1999, p. 22). In October 1999, Cuba and the United States reached agreement on technical measures to improve cooperation, establishing telephone and fax communication and coordinating the radio frequencies of the respective coast guards. Procedures were approved to coordinate future joint boarding parties involving U.S. and Cuban forces (Kornbluh, 2000, pp. 8-10).

Other factors contributed to this relative stability in US-Cuban relations, notwithstanding the conflict. Whereas in 1962, the joint Chiefs of Staff recommended to President Kennedy a massive military attack on Cuba, in 1996, the joint Chiefs did not back a military response to the shootdown crisis.¹⁴ President Clinton, moreover, retained the various migration agreements, widened aspects of cooperation over technical issues, and imposed tighter controls to prevent unauthorized flights over Cuban territory.

In short, despite the high level of bilateral confrontation, US-Cuban relations in the 1990s stopped short of war. Cuba successfully deterred US military actions. Governments that were in most other respects US allies countered US policies toward Cuba. And the United States and Cuba constructed confidence-building procedures and adopted other policies to make accidental war less likely.

Conclusions

The Cold War turned colder in the Caribbean in the 1990s. Cuba became the only country once governed by a communist party whose domestic political regime the United States remained committed by law and policy to replace, albeit “by peaceful means.”

The end of the Cold War international system, and specifically the collapse of the Soviet Union, forced Cuba to adjust along the lines that realist and neorealist explanations would predict. Cuba had to downsize its foreign policy and “suffer what it must.” International systemic explanations also predict that the victorious power would flex its muscle; the extent and intensity of US interest in shaping Cuba’s domestic political regime, however, would be unexpected from these explanations.

The longstanding ideological themes in US hemispheric policies that preceded the anticommunism of the Cold War were a second necessary factor. The United States has long insisted on its right to shape the domestic politics and economics of neighboring countries. The Torricelli and Helms-Burton Acts are lineal descendants of the Monroe Doctrine and the Roosevelt Corollary. The United States can be pragmatic in the design of many policies throughout the world, but it has always been much more ideological, not just more imposing, in its own backyard. Cuba’s own ideological disarray in the 1990s made it vulnerable to renewed US pressures. Cuba’s compounded structural and ideological weaknesses heightened the intrusive ambitions of the United States to reshape Cuba’s future. The US government rediscovered its imperialist history and liked what it saw.

Domestic politics provided the necessary connection between these large-scale structural and ideological causes, on the one hand, and the specific policy outcomes, on the other. The process

of enactment of the Torricelli and Helms-Burton Acts was the child of domestic politics in the United States, crystallized through mobilizing incidents when a Congressional faction could maneuver strategically to prevail. The 1996 mobilizing incident, in turn, was facilitated and accelerated by the consequences of hardliner ascendancy in Cuban domestic politics, especially since early that year. Cuba's hardliners bear major responsibility for the approval of the Helms-Burton Act. The hardliners in each country were each other's best allies, each remaining an obstacle to changing the quality of US-Cuban relations, each delaying the likelihood of a peaceful democratic transition in Cuba.

The ultimate puzzle, then, was why "real" war did not break out between the United States and Cuba in the 1990s. The answer offered in this essay is that Cuba successfully deterred the United States from invading, and that other powers effectively "balanced" against US policies toward Cuba, as neorealist scholars would expect. But the US and Cuban governments also deserved credit for building a modest network of confidence-building procedures to prevent accidental war. Yet, the shootdown of February 24, 1996, exemplifies the great danger of accidental conflict triggered by provocative and illegal actions by certain Cuban American groups. As the two countries approached the centennial of the first US military occupation of Cuba in 1898, the Cold War in the Caribbean had become even colder.

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¹ For Castro's remarks, see Blight, Allyn, and Welch, 1993: 303. I was a participant at this meeting and heard the statement.

² For an assessment of Cuba's recent record with foreign investment, see Pérez-López, 1995; and Naciones Unidas, 1995.

³ Official Cuban trade accounts value one Cuban peso as equal to one US dollar.

⁴ For a classic demonstration of this point, see Blasier, 1985.

⁵ The Cuban government had long promulgated a mix of pragmatic and ideological policies. At issue here is not the discovery of pragmatic behavior but the loss of an intellectual and value-laden framework to support, justify, and explain the twists and turns of routine policymaking.

⁶ This information comes from several confidential author interviews in Washington, DC, 1996.

⁷ The President has no authority to waive the provisions that deny visas for visiting the United States to executives (and their spouses and children) of firms that “traffic” in goods or services derived from property once expropriated in Cuba.

⁸ For a subtle analysis of the common position of the European Union countries with regard to Cuba, see IRELA, 1996.

⁹ These paragraphs rely partly on confidential author interviews in Washington, DC, 1993, 1996, 1997; and Havana, 1996.

¹⁰ For an analysis and history of U.S.-Cuban migration relations, see Domínguez, 1992.

¹¹ Confidential author interviews, Washington, DC, 1997. For discussion of wider implications, see González, 1996: 23-24.

¹² Confidential author interviews, Washington, DC, 1993, 1996, 1997. Some Cuban American members of Congress criticized these meetings. See CubaINFO, 1996a: 2-3.

¹³ Confidential author interviews, Havana, 1996; Miami, 1997; Washington, 1997. On July 13, 1996, I witnessed one example of such U.S.-Cuban collaboration. On Cuban television, I watched the Cuban American flotilla just outside Cuban territorial waters surrounded by U.S. and Cuban coast guard vessels.

¹⁴ Confidential author interviews, Washington, DC, 1996.

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